

# Yo La Tengo — Concentrating On Their Craft, Not Their Image

BY WENDY MITCHELL  
SENIOR WRITER

Yo La Tengo's Ira Kaplan has had only a few guitar lessons, and it shows. He's a brilliant guitarist, but his sounds are creations, not repetitions of anything others could have taught him. He agreed traditional training had little relevance to him: "It seems like most of the things I play are just from being brave enough to play them."

His — and drummer/vocalist Georgia Hubley bassist James McNew's — braveness is apparent when you hear Yo La Tengo's textural and structural experimentation. At Saturday's Cat's Cradle show, the band shifted from heartbreaking ballads to delectable cacophony which left your entire digestive system vibrating. After an exhausting series of two encores and on-the-spot covers (including Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams"), the band left the crowd with a feedback-drenched version of the Velvet Underground's "I Heard Her Call My Name."

While The Velvets provide a starting point (literate, artsy, experimental), Yo La Tengo sets off on a path completely their own, only occasionally detouring with other reference points: Their "Shaker" takes cues from Big Black's "Kerosene," and "Tom Courtenay," rollicks along like Crooked Rain-era Pavement.

The current eight-date East Coast tour provides a break for their wintry hometown, Hoboken, N.J., to spend a few days in sunny Florida. The tour holds another benefit, guitarist/vocalist/organist Kaplan said from his hotel in Burlington on Sunday. "We tend to buy most of our records on tour." While he'd already picked up a singles collection from Flying Saucer Attack and some David Kilgour solo material, Kaplan was ready for more — nothing specific, but whatever strikes him. "A lot of it depends on what we see in the used bins, we're as thrifty as the next consumer."

You're more likely to find their summer album, *Elect-O-Pura*, on any respectable Best of 1995 list — not the used bin. In addition, Yo La Tengo recently released

*Camp Yo La Tengo*, an EP with reworked songs from *Elect*, as well as a Seeds cover. Kaplan said *Mataador* would be reissuing the bands old albums this summer, as well as possibly a compilation of previously unreleased (at least on album) songs. He said, "It's not so much a new album, but a filling in the cracks kind of thing."

What follows are excerpts from our conversation:

*How much of your shows are improvised? Obviously, you're not saying, "We're gonna play this song, and it's going to last exactly four and a half minutes."*

Well, we have a set list, and we practice (laughs), but I think one of the things we strive for is to trust ourselves to do things we don't know are coming. We never plan what we're going to do for an encore before we get out there. We've done really embarrassing things like stand there deciding, it's just riveting entertainment. Luckily, last night we were able to make up our minds.

*Are you like that off-stage, too — do you "roll with the punches"?*

Probably not as much, I try to be. I think what we're trying to do on stage is create an environment in which we can then roll with the punches... That's not exactly a good expression. I think it's more like react with the punches.

*On the notes on the back of Elect-O-Pura — I know they can't all be taken seriously — but one of them says, "The sound of a guitar is with me all the time — or am I with it?" Are you one of those guys who hears music in everything: the can opener, whatever?*

I think we probably do. One of the things we thought were funny about those liner notes is that they're a joke that is dry enough that can be taken seriously, or has elements of seriousness to it, that's our favorite kind of joke.

*I was intrigued last night when you said people think you're sarcastic even when you're sincere. Why do you think that is?*

I just have that sound to my voice, the wise-guy. I was thinking about that this morning in the shower, I was blabbing away.

*It just seemed like you were having a lot of*

*fun.*  
I was.  
*You aren't afraid to do ballads or long songs. A lot of bands shy away from those, why do you do them?*

Our own feeling is that there is no formula for what a good song is, and anytime anybody says, "rock and roll means two and a half minutes," or any formula, that's not very effective for us. We feel like a song can be long, short, fast, slow, loud, quiet, anything. I think we would like the idea of the show and the record changing in contours and things in the course of it. For us, it makes it easier and more rewarding to play for a long time.

*You've done stuff with people around here... Chris Stamey (on various projects, recently with his duo with Kirk Ross), Mac (McCaughan, who invited Hubley and Kaplan to collaborate on a Portastatic tune). How did you get involved with them?*

Being fans, and they asked us. But I think it's more from knowing them. We've done a number of things with Chris over the years. He was extremely helpful to us when we first formed. He played guitar with us, he produced a single, gave us a lot of really good help. That was really important to us because we were such fans and admirers of him and them (the dB's), and when they thought we were worthy of their time and attention, it was important to us.

*You guys don't necessarily have an image. Do you think you're an image-less band? But not in a bad way... you just play your music. I guess there's always the marriage thing (Kaplan and Hubley are married).*

Yeah, I think that's true.

*Do you think that's ever hurt you?*

I think a lot of these things hurt us in terms of commercially, but they're helpful in terms of our longevity. A lot of it is not tremendously in our control, I think if we were a different kind of band, we just wouldn't be as good. I think there's people who can do that stuff better, who can sing better, play better, just kind of are better at the craft. For better or worse, we just don't have much else to offer.

*You're being very humble.*



Hoboken, N.J.'s Yo La Tengo (front-to-back: Ira Kaplan, Georgia Hubley and James McNew) find there's no formula for a good song, as evidenced by their affection for ballads, longer songs and the occasional Fleetwood Mac cover.

Well, only slightly. We played like two hours last night, that wasn't very humble.

*Talking about longevity, you've been releasing albums for more than 10 years, and yet you still take requests. You're not one of those bands that just plays what you want to?*

We don't take them (requests) all night. But I think, especially in a show that's gone well, we treat the encore quite differently... When we end the set, we're willing to stop playing. At that point, things change,

and if the audience wants us to play, we'll play as long as that happens. It seems like an interesting idea. There's frequently enough requests that we can pick and choose. And sometimes we'll take a long time deciding what song to play because we're not really into what other people are yelling. Last night, there were songs that we hadn't thought of doing, so it's a challenge.

*So, you're not going to watch the Super*

*Bowl?*

I'm hoping not to, but sometimes those things have tentacles and are hard to escape. I'd rather go to the movies instead.

*OK, what are your Oscar picks?*

"Safe," it was really eerie and unusual. "Living in Oblivion" just keeps getting funnier. "Crumb" has a chance, maybe as a documentary, that was great. Although, the documentary category is such a disaster. Wow, I came up with that pretty fast.

# Established Artists, Mediocre Gangster Rappers Release Weak Hip-Hop Albums

BY TODD GILCHRIST  
MUSIC EDITOR

This year's hip-hop selections were a threadbare amalgam of weak selections from established artists, mediocre debuts from gangsta rappers and badly-produced East Coasters.

In short, they were the worst collection of singles since Hammer hit it big.

LL Cool J "hardened up" his image and enlisted Easy Mo Bee, hip-hop's quickest style burnout (beat, beat, beep, beat, beat, beep), to produce the very depressing *Mr. Smith*.

Redman's sophomore effort, *Dare Iz A Darkside*, was frustratingly similar to his debut, due largely to the weak production by Erick Sermon (how many times can he sample his own songs and think it's clever?). Sermon's *Double Or Nothing* "smoothed" itself into innocuousness, much like the majority of tracks on Black Sheep's *Non-Fiction*.

Several albums, though they met with small financial success, proved to be superb entries into this currently waning musical genre.

The Roots, Pharcyde and Aceyalone all failed to bring in significant revenues, but they were critically revered and actually developed a small but devoted following. The following are my 10 top picks for hip-hop for the year:

1) The Roots — *Do You Want More!!!!!!!* — Geffen's first hip-hop record of the year was also their best.

They reintroduced what hip-hop originally rebelled against — live instrumentation — and produced a work that has tighter beats than any drum machine, horn riffs jazzier than any sample could approach, and lyrics so intelligent and tight that they almost revolutionized emceeing. A true classic in every sense of the word.

2) Pharcyde — *Labcahincalfornia* — Like the Roots, Pharcyde broke down the fourth wall between two genres of music, in this case R&B and hip-hop, and created the most soulful album of the year. The production, almost entirely by the group itself, demonstrated a growth that suggested even more about the future of rap than about the group itself. They combined smooth production, honeyed vocals, hard beats and intelligent lyrics to escalate rap to a new level.

3) Guru — *Jazzmatazz Volume II: The New Reality* — The first volume of Guru's

solo work sought to unite jazz and rap in a new and interesting way by targeting the fundamental virtues of both musics — their improvisational purity and spontaneity — but he partially failed.

This time he hit the nail directly on the head, and he brought the best artists from each genre together and made an album that is brilliantly produced, entertaining and often poignant.

4) AZ — *Doc Or Die* — At first, I didn't want to like this guy (I still don't like "Sugar Hill"), but the album's non-single songs and his tighter-than-tight delivery made for one of the year's strongest debuts.

Much like Nas, he enlisted several big-name producers who recognized his talent and helped him put together a coherent album that matched his frenetic and artistic style.

This partially slept-on album will years from now be highly revered, much like the D.O.C.'s debut is now.

5) Coolio — *Gangsta's Paradise* — Again, not an album I would have expected to like, but the end result of Coolio's sophomore record may be the best-produced album of the year.

The infectious "Gangsta's Paradise" and "Too Hot" now dominate the airwaves and MTV, but the other songs on *Gangsta's Paradise* indicate that this is one gangsta who feels his words can do more than simply make money while glorifying violence and misogyny.

6) KRS-One — *s/t* — KRS-One has been reborn. After the death of Scott LaRock, he founded around in maudlin, harangue-heavy albums with generally weak production and lyrics that indicated Knowledge Reigned Supreme, but no longer over everybody.

*The Return Of Da Boom-Box* shone just above rap's surface, and with the release of his self-titled *KRS-One*, our first and foremost hip-hop dialectician returns to his earliest glories.

Premier's production sparked up KRS' especially energetic lyrics, and we see a combination of the old and the new with such singles as "MC's Act Like They Don't Know" (with piano samples reminiscent of "The Bridge Is Over").

"I come with my skills and leave with your motherfuckin' respect." Indeed.

7) All Wu-Tang releases. Although Method Man's album came out very late in 1994, he makes it into this list on the strength of his "All I Need" remixes alone.

I didn't think there could be a cooler single than "Brooklyn Zoo," but Ol' Dirty Bastard outdid himself with "Shimmy Shimmy Ya."

Raekwon brought us the first totally solid Wu album since their debut with his *All 4 Cuban Link*, and The Genius stabbed us where it counts with his "Liquid Swords" and then poured on a remix of "Cold World" which featured D'Angelo. Perhaps these guys should be singing "The World Is Mine."

8) Various Artists — *DefJam Music Group Ten Year Anniversary* — The first big (official) hip-hop compilation to be released, DefJam's Anniversary contains more classic songs than you imagined existed.

Besides, any album which features Public Enemy and LL Cool J at their peaks, the Beasties at their most infantile, Nice and Smooth before they became aggravating, the only Redman song I genuinely like and Slick Rick has got to be pretty good.

9) Smif-N-Wessun — *Dah Shinin'* — Smif-N-Wessun satiated our desire for a new Black Moon album (for now), but they set themselves apart by incorporating a small sub-genre of reggae into their music.

Their spaced-out, echoing ambient sounds complement A Tribe Called Quest's *Midnight Marauders* more than Black Moon's *Enta Da Stage*, but either way, *Dah Shinin'* is a hell of a listen.

10) Mobb Deep — *The Infamous...* — "Survival Of The Fittest" and "Shook Ones" introduced us to Mobb Deep's sullen stories of street life, but no one would have guessed they could carry their tales of woe through an entire album.

Far superior to their debut, *The Infamous* explains, as only that stark East Coast style can, that urban life ain't easy.

But Mobb Deep doesn't let us get bogged down in diatribes. They unite the aesthetic of the music and the intellect of the rappers' minds in a most fascinating way.

# Shannon Ravenal's Annual Pick of Best Southern Fiction Focuses on Deep South

■ "New Stories From the South" has a flavorful portion of the "melting pot."

Algonquin Books' "New Stories From the South, The Year's Best, 1995" is in bookstores now.

This 10th annual collection of short stories by 17 authors contains little bits of all of the things that have made Southern literature distinctive with our renowned flavor.

You've got your powerful, twisted religious fervor.

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You've got your violence.

Barry Hannah, this collection's gracefully aging heavyweight, once wrote, "The Deep South might be wretched, but it can howl."

Most of the howling in this collection does occur in the Deep South.

In fact, most of this year's stories, howling and otherwise, come from that region south of the South that includes Alabama, Mississippi, New Orleans and the rest of the Louisiana coast.

Apparently the South is shrinking.

Over a hundred years after the end of the Civil War the South may finally be retreating.

As anyone who read even one or two of the installments of "Pete and Shirley, the Great Tar Heel Novel" in *The News & Observer* can attest, Research Triangle Park is about as Southern as Cocoa Pebbles are prehistoric.

This New South — now not even called the South but rather the "Sunbelt" — is in many ways a comfier and more urbane

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## New Stories from the South

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EDITED BY SHANNON RAVENAL

place to live than the older South. Unfortunately, gains for the Chamber of Commerce can often translate to losses for literature.

When this collection stays in the Deep South the results are as varied as R. Sebastian Bennett's "Riding with the Doctor," Robert Olen Butler's "Boy Born with Tattoo of Elvis" and Hannah's "Drummer Down."

Bennett gives us a Donald Barthelme-like wild ride with a pompous Doctor of Folklore Studies.

The Doctor is let loose to pontificate at an out-of-hand Mardi Gras celebration. Bennett easily wins the most rib-tickling opening line award with, "I am an expert

on folklore, and I know all about the masks with noses shaped like penises."

Butler takes what could be a contrived premise and turns it into a powerful story: What would it be like to be a baby made famous in the tabloids? How would a piece of young poor white trash cope with a birthmark of Elvis's face in "the very center" of his chest?

He packs his nine-page story with enough lust and confusion to make your head spin.

"Drummer Down," is a tender, angry and aching elegy to his friend Drum, dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in a trailer outside of Tuscaloosa.

James Lee Burke and Ken Craven also offer stories that are beyond southern and into brilliant.

Fans of third-wave southern writers like Lee Smith will enjoy Hillary Hebert's "Ladies of the Marble Hearth."

Set in Greenville, N.C., this more sedate story deals with the dying culture of ladies' book clubs and studied gentility.

(Incidentally it also fits into the thesis that North Carolina does not make for as luridly sensational fictional material as Louisiana.)

Deep South or Upper, this year's collection is another eclectic bunch of stories, working in a common region but pushing the envelope on what we may consider "Southern fiction."

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